



The Effect of Instruction on the Improvement of Pragmatic Knowledge of EFL Students

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Abstract: *Despite the importance of pragmatics, the study of the acquisition of pragmatic competence seems to be an area of research that has been somewhat neglected. To broaden the scope of interlanguage pragmatics, this study was conducted to compare the effect of implicit versus explicit instruction in the development of pragmatic competence of EFL learners. To fulfill the purpose of the study, sixty intermediate learners of English were chosen from two language institutes and were randomly assigned to two experimental groups. The materials for the instruction were dialogues in which the speech act of 'apology' had been presented. The experimental group (1) received implicit instruction. The instructor read the dialogues and asked the learners to repeat them. The experimental group (2) received explicit instruction through explanation, list of apologies and five semantic formulae of 'apology'. Data were collected by means of a pretest and posttest administered before and after the training period that lasted thirteen sessions. Results of the two experimental groups denoted the positive effects of two kinds of instructions, although the explicit instruction group outperformed the implicit instruction group. In addition, this study adds to the small, but growing, body of research on interlanguage pragmatic development in foreign language.*

Keywords: *Pragmatics, Pragmatic Competence, Speech Act, Implicit and Explicit Instruction*

INTRODUCTION

When second language learners engage in conversations with native speakers, difficulties may arise due to their lack of mastery of the conversational norms involve in the production of speech acts. Such conversational difficulties may in turn cause breakdowns in communication. When the nonnative speakers violate speech act realization patterns used by native speakers of a target language, they often encounter the problem of violating conversational (and politeness) norms (Kasper, 1990). Communication difficulties result when conversationalists do not share the same knowledge of the subtle rules governing conversation. (Scarcella, 1990) describes high frequency of such difficulties to the fact that “nonnative speakers, when conversing, often transfer the conversational rules of their first language into the second” (p.338). Ever since Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of communicative competence, the importance of communicative competence has been fully recognized as a goal of language teaching and learning in the field of second language acquisition. Hymes maintained that learners must learn to speak not only grammatically, but also appropriately to achieve communicative goals. Several studies (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Bouton, 1996; Kasper 1997) have shown that learners of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily possess comparable pragmatic competence. Even grammatically advanced learners may use language inappropriately and show differences from target-language pragmatic norms.

(Bouton, 1996) notes that the development of communicative competence should be the goal of language teaching. He proposes three major directions that researchers can take in order to further contribute to the theory of communicative competence: 1) the refinement of the study of speech acts as they occur in different cultures, 2) an investigation to determine the extent to which explicit instruction can increase the rate at which nonnative speakers develop different factors of their pragmatic competence, and 3) the contribution pragmatics can make to the presentation of different functions of a language in textbooks designed for second

language learners. So far, speech acts examined are compliments, apologies, complaints, and refusals. There is a research literature on all of these speech acts, documenting how they are performed by native speakers of English in different social contexts for instance, studies such as (Olshtain et al. 1990), and (Morrow, 1996) explored whether the features under investigation were teachable at all. (Billmyer, 1990) and Bouton (1994) examined whether students who received instruction in complimenting and implicature did better than controls that did not. Yet another group explored the effectiveness of specific teaching approaches. In these studies, two or more student groups received different types of instruction. In addition, (House et al. 1981), (House, 1996), and (Tateyama et al. 1997) compared explicit with implicit approaches. Explicit teaching involved description, explanation, and discussion of the pragmatic feature in addition to input and practice, whereas implicit teaching included input and practice without the metapragmatic component. Results from these studies point to a positive improvement of the learner pragmatic competence after the instructional process. In fact, according to (Kasper, 1997), there is little evidence for aspects of pragmatic competence that resist development through teaching. The study by (Norris et al. 2000) which focuses on the role of instruction in interlanguage pragmatics denotes a clear advantage of explicit over implicit instruction. Despite the positive results obtained by studies in the field (Tateyama, 2001), the extent to which explicit formal instruction affects pragmatic development deserves further research. In other words, more research needs to be done to focus on the kind of instructional measures that are most effective for EFL contexts and other related issues to developmental pragmatics in impoverished L2 contexts. Consequently, this study investigates the effect of explicit and implicit instruction of speech act in particular 'apology' in Iran to see if the same results are obtained. In other words, pragmatic information is so context sensitive, and because the attitude of textbook writers and curriculum developers has been that it is learned through experience with the target language and culture over time instead of through instruction, this study addresses the use of explicit and implicit instruction to lead EFL learners to notice pragmatic forms.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were sixty female intermediate students chosen based on accessible sample. In order to make them homogenous in their knowledge of English, they were chosen by means of the OPT at two private Language Institutes in Yazd. Their age ranged between 17 and 25 years old, the average age being 21.5 years.

2.2. Sampling

The OPT had been administered to 134 students as a placement test to separate the intermediate level students. The students whose scores ranged from 1 SD below to 1 SD above the mean were chosen as the intermediate level. Thirty pairs of similar scores were randomly placed into two experimental groups. To make sure that the two groups were homogenous regarding their level of English language proficiency, a t-test was applied to their means of the OPT.

Table 1. The Results of the T-Test of the OPT

Groups	Mean Difference	Doff.	T	sig
EG(1) - EG(2)	-0.7667	58	-0.544	0.58

2.3. Instrumentation

In order to carry out this study, first, the second part of the OPT, the grammar section, which has 100 items and takes 50 minutes was used. Next, a pretest was administered to the two groups. The test consisted of two sections: a) an open-ended task, which required learners to complete the dialogues and b) a multiple choice section in which learners had to choose the most appropriate answers. In these dialogues, the social level of the apologizer and the offender, and the severity of the offense are to some extent clear. The materials for the instruction were dialogues in which the speech acts of apology were presented. These dialogues were representative of potential situations in which the learners may find themselves and require them to

accomplish communicative purpose by using the speech act of apology. The treatment dialogues reflect conversations between two or more people one of whom make mistakes and the other one has to apologize, so the other one can forgive him/her or not. They show different offender and apologizer relationship (formal/informal and distant/not distant) and different task types (major offense and minor offense). These dialogues were written by the researcher and two English native speakers. Two experimental groups saw the dialogues and heard their teacher read in subsequent treatment sessions. In the explicit instruction group, learners were taught five semantic formulae of speech act of apology, also some explanations about them and a set of common apology forms in a list, and appropriate feedback.

The semantic formulae and a list of apologies are shown as follows:

Formula (1): Expression of an apology (e.g. I, m sorry, I apologize, excuse me, forgive me etc.).

Formula (2): Acknowledgement of responsibility:

- a) Explicit self-blame (e.g., It was my fault.)
- b) Lack of intent (e.g. I didn't mean to.)
- c) Justify the hearer (e.g., you're right.)
- d) Expression of self-deficiency (e.g., I was confused)
- e) Concern for the hearer (e.g., I hope I didn't hurt you.)
- f) Admission of facts or stating the offense (e.g., Oh, I spilled the tea on your desk).

Formula (3): An explanation or account of the situation (e.g., I'm sorry, the bus was late, I was really sick; I had to go to the hospital).

Formula (4): An offer of repair: (e.g., I'll pay for the broken vase. I'll buy you another.)

Formula (5): Promise of forbearance: This won't happen again. This would be my last mistake). At the end, a posttest, which was the same as the pretest, was administered.

2.4. Procedure

The selected participants were randomly divided into EG (1) and EG (2). As the results of the t-test show, the means of the two groups are insignificantly different. Each experimental group had thirty subjects. The OPT was administered under similar condition for all of the students and they had fifty minutes for one hundred items of the test. The scoring was done by the researcher. Then, the pretest, which had two parts, was administered. The pretest, which had two parts, was used: a) an open-ended task which required them to complete the dialogues by the use of the most appropriate apology forms, and (b) multiple choice part in which the students had to choose the most appropriate answer, and it was explained that none of the choices was completely wrong. They had twenty minutes for these two parts. The exam session was relaxed and distraction-free. It was administered one week prior to the instructional treatment.

The test responses were scored by researcher with the aid of a native English speaker. For the open-ended dialogue task, each sentence was scored using the following criteria: (a) two points were given for a response that showed awareness of pragmatic features like politeness indicators. In other words, if the students had used appropriate formulae, they would have received the score; (b) one point was awarded for an appropriate response without pragmatic features; and (c) zero point for an inappropriate response. Grammatical errors were not considered as long as the answer was comprehensible.

The treatment consisted of thirteen sessions of instruction, three sessions in a week. In each session, they were taught one dialogue. As mentioned, each treatment dialogue reflects conversation between two or more people, one of whom makes a mistake and has to apologize. The material was written by two native speakers and the researcher. At the beginning of the sessions unknown vocabularies were explained to the two groups and they were asked to make sentences with the new words to ensure that the students know the meaning of them.

The experimental group (1) received implicit instruction, which was as follows:

- 1) The instructor read the dialogues aloud and the students listened to her.
- 2) They were asked to repeat the sentences.
- 3) The teacher asked them to practice the dialogues with a partner.
- 4) Then, they read the dialogues.

They were not provided with detailed explanations of the dialogues and speech act of apology.

The experimental group (2) received explicit instruction, as it is mentioned bellow:

- 1) The instructor read the dialogues aloud and the students listened to her.
- 2) They were asked to repeat the sentences.

- 3) The teacher asked them to practice the dialogues with a partner.
- 4) They read the dialogues.
- 5) They were asked to infer what the offender and apologizer were talking about.
- 6) They were asked to focus on some features after asking learners themselves to discover the points. In other words, the teacher led the participants to identify for each dialogue the relationship between the offender and apologizer and type of task. (e.g., is A apologizing to B for something that is insignificant or for something that is serious?)
- 7) Intensifiers were explained in the dialogues. It was explained that they were used when major offense had happened and when the relationship between the speakers were formal like a professor and a student or distant like two strangers in the street. They were provided with some examples as follow: I'm very sorry; I'm really sorry; please, forgive me...
- 8) For each dialogue the semantic formula, which was used, was explained with some examples. Sometimes after teaching one dialogue in each session, learners were asked to tell the instructor which formula had been used in it.
- 9) It was explained that sometimes two, three, or four-part apologies can be used. Example: I'm so sorry. I forgot all about it. I'll bring it along tomorrow. After three weeks, a posttest was administered to check which treatment had resulted in a better performance. It was the same as the pretest. The same scoring procedure was used in the posttests.

3. Statistical Analysis

The statistical procedures taken in this study were the following:

The mean and standard deviation of the pretests of the first (implicit) experimental group and the second (explicit) experimental group were calculated. Independent sample t-test was used to be an appropriate procedure to compare the means of the two groups. Then, the mean and standard deviation of the posttests of EG (1) and EG (2) were calculated. Independent sample t-test was used to compare the means.

To compare the means of the pretest and posttest of EG (1) matched t-test was formulated. A Matched t-test was used to indicate the difference between the pretest and posttest of EG (2). All the statistical procedures were conducted through SPSS software.

4) Discussions and Conclusions

In this study, certain significant findings were obtained as presented here in brief:

In the pretest results, the mean scores among the groups were not significantly different based on the results of the t-test. As it is shown in table1, the mean of implicit instruction group was (44.73) and explicit instruction group was (43.07).

Table 2) Descriptive Statistics of the Pretest for the Implicit and Explicit Experimental Group

GROUPS	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Implicit	30	26.92	69.23	44.7360	11.84062
Explicit	30	23.07	65.38	43.0717	11.92623

The posttest results, however, indicated a difference among the groups. The mean score for the explicit instruction group was higher (73.71) than the implicit instruction group (59.86) as it is shown in table2.

Table 3) Descriptive Statistics of the Posttest for the Implicit and Explicit Experimental

GROUPS	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Implicit	30	42.3	76.92	59.867	10.5300
Explicit	30	0	92.3	3	2
		53.8	0	73.712	11.5632
		4		0	7

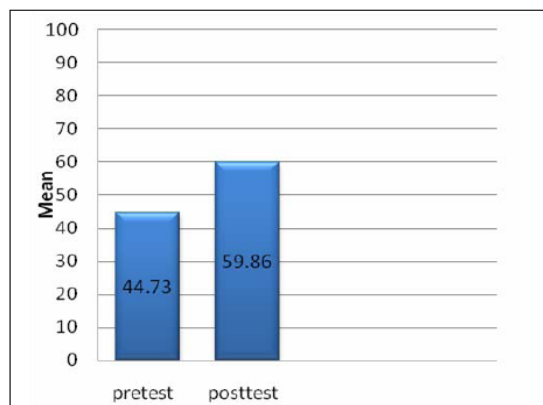


Figure 1. Comparing the Mean of the Pretest and Posttest of the Implicit Instruction Group

The t-test results showed significant differences among the first and the second experimental groups. In addition, the results of the pretest and posttest of the first (implicit) experimental group and the second (explicit) experimental group were verified by the t-test once again to show whether there were significant differences before and after the treatment in these groups. The t-test results indicated that both groups had better performance after the treatment and it was significant. As mentioned earlier, the second group performed better in the posttest because of the explicit instruction, which was through explanation, rules and semantic formulae of 'apology'. These quantitative results from the pretest and posttest suggest that the instruction in general had an effect on improvement of the learner's pragmatic knowledge to produce the speech act, apology. The explicit pre-instruction appears to induce the best results for recognition of apology strategies on the tests; making them more aware of pragmatic strategies and concept. These findings support previous studies that indicate the benefits of explicit instruction for the acquisition of L2 pragmatics (Billmyer, 1990; Rose and N.g. Kwaifun2001; Tateyama, 2001, and Tateyama et al., 1997).

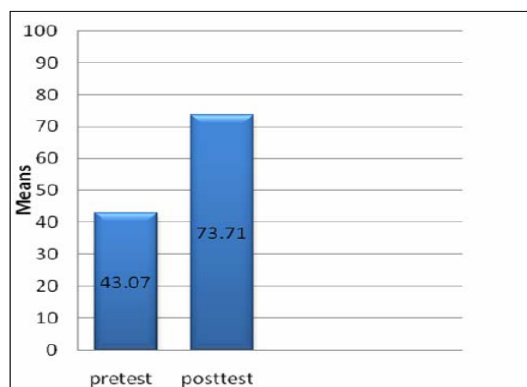


Figure 2. Comparing the Means of the Pretest and Posttest of the Explicit Instruction Group

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